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(71) Applicant: Edo Corporation/Western Division
2645 South 300 West
Salt Lake City Utah 84115(US)

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(72) Inventor: Lapetina, Robert A.
4196 Abinadi Road
Salt Lake City Utah 84117(US)

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(72) Inventor: Snow, Gordon L.
2748 East 5141 South
Salt Lake City Utah 84117(US)

(72) Inventor: Baird, P. David
1376 Lincoln Street
Salt Lake City Utah 84105(US)

(74) Representative: Patentanwälte Grünecker, Kinkeldey,
Stockmair & Partner
Maximilianstrasse 58
D-8000 München 22(DE)

(54) Flexible piezoelectric transducer assembly.

(57) A flexible piezoelectric transducer assembly for producing sonar signals for transmission underwater and for detecting reflected sonar signals. The assembly includes a generally flat, flexible casing formed with a plurality of compartments, each of which is for receiving a piezoelectric element. A plurality of piezoelectric elements are disposed in each of the compartments and are coupled by way of conductors to electronic circuitry which produces electrical signals for stressing the piezoelectric elements and which processes electrical signals produced by the piezoelectric element in response to reflected sonar signals. The piezoelectric elements are spaced apart in the casing to allow flexing and bending, while also maintaining high packing density. The piezoelectric elements are also selected to have low cross-coupling characteristics.

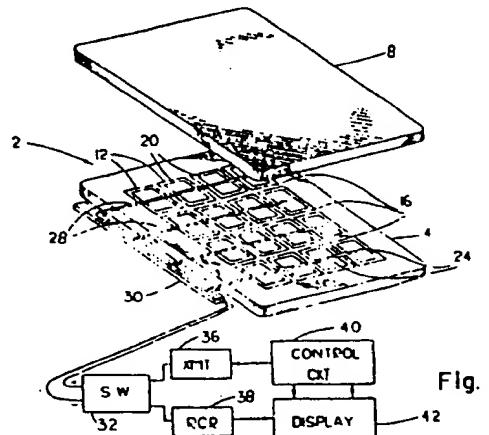


Fig. 1

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FLEXIBLE PIEZOELECTRIC TRANSDUCER ASSEMBLY

This invention relates to a piezoelectric transducer assembly having an array of piezoelectric elements embedded or held in a flexible casing.

15

Piezoelectric elements, primarily crystals and ceramics, are employed in a variety of devices including crystal microphones, ultrasonic devices, accelerometers and oscillators. One of the most common uses of piezoelectric elements is in underwater sonar equipment in which a piezoelectric sonar transducer is stimulated by electrical signals to emit sonar signals which radiate out from the transducer. The sonar signals are reflected from underwater objects and the reflected signals are detected by the transducer which produces electrical signals carrying information about the underwater objects.

1 Transducers typically used in underwater sonar
2 equipment consist of either a single crystal or
3 ceramic element or a rigid array of elements. It
4 has been recognized that it would be desirable to
5 have a flexible, conformable transducer which
6 could be placed on various shaped surfaces for
7 use. If a rigid transducer were applied to such
8 surfaces and the surfaces were flexed or bent to
9 any extent, the transducer could be damaged. A
10 flexible, conformable transducer, however, would
11 not only allow for ease of attachment to different
12 shaped surfaces, but would also accommodate flexing
13 and bending of the surface on which the transducer
14 was placed.

15

16 There have been a number of proposals for providing
17 flexible transducers including grinding up of
18 piezoelectric material, embedding the material in
19 an elastic material, and then attempting to polarize
20 the entire unit so that it will function as a
21 piezoelectric device. This type of unit, however,
22 is typically very difficult to manufacture, sensitive
23 to hydrostatic pressure changes and lacking in
24 uniformity. Also, it is difficult to achieve
25 consistency of characteristics from one unit to
the next.

1 It is an object of the invention to provide a piezoelectric transducer assembly which is flexible and conformable to surfaces on which the assembly may be placed.

5

It is also an object of the invention to provide such an assembly which is easy to manufacture and whose quality can be readily controlled.

10 It is a further object of the invention to provide a piezoelectric transducer which is fairly immune to high pressures.

15 It is an additional object of the invention to provide a generally planar or linear, flexible piezoelectric transducer which can be shaped to focus or direct the sonar beams produced by the transducer as desired.

20 The above and other objects of the invention are realized in an illustrative embodiment of a flexible piezoelectric transducer assembly which includes an encasement made of a flexible, resilient material and having a generally flat profile, where the 25 encasement includes a number of compartments spaced apart generally in a plane in the encasement. Also included are a plurality of piezoelectric

1 elements, each disposed in a different compartment
of the encasement, and flexible conductors or
conductive coatings which are arranged to extend
through the encasement into contact with the
5 elements for carrying externally generated electrical
signals to the elements to stress the elements,
and for carrying to a signal processor or other
utilization device electrical signals produced by
the piezoelectric elements when the elements are
10 stressed.

With the above construction, the encasement holding
the piezoelectric elements may be flexed or bent
to conform to different mounting surface shapes.
15 Advantageously, each piezoelectric element is
polarized prior to installation in the encasement
and so manufacture of the transducer assembly is
simplified. A variety of materials might be used
for the encasement including polyurethane, polyethelene,
20 neoprene rubber, etc.

In the drawings:

The above and other objects, features and advantages
25 of the invention will become apparent from a
consideration of the following detailed description
presented in connection with the accompanying
drawings in which:

1 FIG. 1 shows a perspective, exploded view of
a flexible planar piezoelectric transducer
assembly made in accordance with the principles
of the present invention;

5

FIG. 2 is a side, fragmented cross-sectional
view of the piezoelectric transducer assembly
of FIG. 1;

10

FIG. 3 is a top, plan, fragmented view of the
base portion of a flexible piezoelectric
transducer assembly showing triangular-shaped
piezoelectric elements;

15

FIG. 4 is a side, fragmented cross-sectional
view of a flexible piezoelectric transducer
assembly which utilizes conductive sheets for
carrying electrical signals to and from the
piezoelectric elements;

20

FIG. 5 is a side, partially cutaway view of a
line-array piezoelectric transducer assembly
made in accordance with the principles of the
present invention;

25

FIG. 6 is a perspective view of an alternative
embodiment of a piezoelectric element which
could be used in the assembly of FIG. 5; and

1 FIG. 7 is a perspective view of still another
embodiment of a piezoelectric element which
could be used in the FIG. 5 assembly.

5 Referring now to the drawings:

Referring to FIG. 1, there is shown an illustrative
embodiment of a flexible planar piezoelectric
transducer assembly which includes a two-piece
10 housing or casing 2 having a base section 4 and a
cover section 8. Both sections are made of a
flexible, resilient material such as polyurethane,
polyethelene, neoprene rubber, etc. When the
cover section 8 is placed over and secured to the
15 base section 4, the casing will present a generally
flat profile as best seen in FIG. 2. The cover
section 8 may be secured to the base section 4 by
18 a suitable bonding agent such as polyurethane.
The casing is formed to be generally square, but
20 could take other shapes such as rectangular,
circular, triangular, etc.

25 Formed in the base section 4 of the casing are a
plurality of generally rectangular compartments
12. These compartments are formed to be fairly
closely packed and nested in the manner shown in
28 FIG. 1 to provide precise spacing of piezoelectric

1 elements (to be discussed momentarily). Adjacent compartments are separated by walls 16 integrally formed in the base section 4. Alternatively, a single large hollow or compartment may be formed

5 in the base section 4 and then the piezoelectric elements (to be discussed momentarily) positioned in the hollow, separated from one another and held in place by an adhesive.

10 A plurality of piezoelectric elements 20, either crystal or ceramic, are also provided, with each piezoelectric element being placed in a different one of the compartments and held in place by an adhesive. The piezoelectric elements 20 are

15 formed to fit snugly in each compartment and thus, for the embodiment of FIG. 1, the elements are shown as having a generally rectangular shape to conform to the shape of the compartments. The elements 20 have a thickness which is greater than

20 the depth of the compartments, such thickness being less than the length and width of the elements.

Thin conductive films 24 are placed on the upper and lower surfaces of each of the piezoelectric elements 20 (advantageously during manufacture of the elements) to enable poling of the elements during manufacture and to serve as electrodes for

1 applying electrical signals to the elements. Such
films could be any suitable conductive material
such as silver, a silver alloy, etc.

5 The piezoelectric elements 20 are selected to
possess low cross-coupling to thereby reduce
response in unwanted modes of operation and enable
use of the elements over a wide band of frequencies
without significant sensitive degradation. Suitable
10 piezoelectric material for achieving this characteristic
include lead mataniobate and lead titanate, among
others.

Conductive strips of material 28 are placed in
15 contact with each of the conductive films 24 on
the upper surfaces of the piezoelectric elements
20, with conductive strips 28 extending through
the casing to a bus 30 which is coupled to a
transmit/receive switch 32. Conductive strips of
20 material 34 (see FIG. 2) are placed in contact
with conductive films positioned on the bottom
surfaces of each of the piezoelectric elements 20
to extend through the casing also to the bus 30.
The conductive strips 28 and 34 could advantageously
25 be strips of silver, copper, etc., held in contact
with the conductive films by spot welding, soldering
or conductive adhesive. Alternatively, the conductive

1 strips could be strips of flexible elastomer
2 containing conductive (e.g. silver) particles of
3 flakes. This latter arrangement would provide
4 desired flexibility.

5

6 An alternative to the two-piece housing or casing
7 of FIG. 1 would be a one-piece housing made, for
8 example, by first supporting the piezoelectric
9 elements, connecting wires, etc., in the desired
10 configuration (using suitable tooling fixtures),
11 and then encapsulating the entire array in the
12 encasement material.

13 The circuitry for producing electrical signals to
14 stress the piezoelectric elements 20, and for
15 detecting the occurrence of stress in the elements
16 includes, in addition to the transmit/receive
17 switch 32, a transmitter 36 and receiver and
18 signal processor 38 both connected to the switch
19 32, a control circuit 40 connected to the transmitter
20 36, and a display unit 42 connected to the control
21 circuit 40 and receiver and signal processor 38.
22 The control circuit 40, which might illustratively
23 be a microprocessor, signals the transmitter 36 to
24 apply electrical signals via the transmit/receive
25 switch 32 to the piezoelectric elements 20 to
stress the elements. The piezoelectric elements

1 20 are thus caused to produce, for example, sonar
signals for underwater transmission. Reflected
sonar signals intercepted by the piezoelectric
elements 20 stress the elements and cause them to
5 produce electrical signals which are applied via
the switch 32 to the receiver and signal processor
38. The receiver and signal processor 38 process
these signals and then signals the display unit to
display information representing the location and
10 shape, for example, of underwater objects from
which the sonar signals are reflected. The
circuitry described is conventional, shown only
for illustrative purposes, and does not form any
part of the invention.

15

The overall size of the transducer assembly could
be whatever is desired by the user, but would
depend in part on the number of piezoelectric
elements to be utilized. Advantageously, the
20 piezoelectric elements 20 would have widths and
lengths of between about 1/8 of an inch and several
inches, and would have thicknesses of between
about 1/100 of an inch and 1 inch. These dimensions
facilitate ease of manufacture and piezoelectric
25 poling. Of course, the smaller the piezoelectric
element, the greater would be the flexibility and
conformability of the transducer assembly. Employment

1 of a flexible casing 2 for holding the piezoelectric
elements serves not only to accommodate the feature
of flexibility and conformability, but also serves
to isolate and protect the piezoelectric elements
5 20 from shock, hydrostatic pressures, water and
other fluids in which it would be used, and other
external effects. With the generally flat profile
of the transducer assembly, the assembly can be
readily attached to flat mounting surfaces and to
10 15 surfaces having shapes which are other than planar
and which may change over time.

FIG. 2 shows a side, fragmented cross-sectional view
of the transducer assembly of FIG. 1 including the
15 base section 4 and cover section 8 of the casing,
the piezoelectric elements 20, and a conductive
strip 28 attached to the conductive films or
electrodes 24 on the top surface of the piezoelectric
elements, and a conductive strip 34 attached to
20 the conductive films or electrodes on the bottom
surface of the elements.

FIG. 3 shows a top plan view of a fragmented
portion of a base section 44 of a casing, where
25 the compartments 48 are formed in a triangular
shape to accommodate triangularly-shaped piezoelectric
elements. Of course, a variety of other shapes

1 could also be employed as earlier indicated. It
is desirable, however, that the piezoelectric
elements be closely packed and nested together and
this is accommodated by either the rectangular or
5 triangular shape.

FIG. 4 shows a side, fragmented cross-sectional
view of a transducer assembly wherein sheets of
conductive material 54 and 58 are respectively
10 placed to contact all of the individual conductive
films placed on the upper surfaces of the piezoelectric
elements, and to contact all of the films or
electrodes on the bottom surfaces of the elements.
These conductive sheets would be provided for
15 carrying externally produced signals simultaneously
to all of the piezoelectric elements, and for
carrying signals produced by all of the elements
simultaneously to an external sink. This provision
of conductive sheets of material is an alternative
20 to the conductive strips 28 and 34 shown in FIG.
1. Advantageously, the conductive sheets would be
made of a composition of conductive particles and
an elastomer, to provide flexibility for bending,
etc.

25

FIG. 5 shows a partially cutaway view of a line
array of piezoelectric elements 60 placed in a

1 flexible encapsulant 64 such as neoprene, polyurethane,
or fluid such as oil or isopar, all of which are
contained in a flexible hose or sleeve 68 made,
for example, of neoprene, polyurethane or vinyl.
5 The sleeve 68 and encapsulant 64 surround the
piezoelectric elements 60 to prevent water or
other fluid in which the line array is used from
reaching the elements. The piezoelectric elements
60 shown in the drawing are elongate bars having a
10 generally square cross-section, but they could be
formed as solid cylinders, hollow cylinders,
cubes of other shapes suitable for placement in a
line array. The top sides of the piezoelectric
elements 60 are coupled together by an electrical
15 conductor 72 while the bottom sides are similarly
coupled together by a conductor 76. These conductors
both carry electrical signals to the piezoelectric
elements 60 to stress the elements and cause them
to produce sonar signals, and carry away electrical
20 signals produced by the elements when the elements
are stressed by reflected sonar signals. The
conductors 72 and 76 would be coupled to circuitry
similar to that shown in FIG. 1. If radially
polarized solid cylinders were used as the piezoelectric
25 elements, the conductors would be coupled to
respective electrodes 80 and 84 disposed on opposite
sides of the cylinders as shown in FIG. 6. If

1 radially polarized hollow cylinders were used, the conductors would be coupled to the inside and outside surfaces of the cylinders as shown in FIG. 7.

5

It is to be understood that the above-described arrangements are only illustrative of the application of the principles of the present invention.

10 Numerous modifications and alternative arrangements may be devised by those skilled in the art without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention and the appended claims are intended to cover such modifications and arrangements.

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C L A I M S

1. A flexible piezoelectric transducer assembly comprising

an encasement made of a flexible, resilient

15 material and having a generally flattened profile, said encasement including a plurality of compartments spaced apart generally in a plane in the encasement,

a plurality of piezoelectric elements selected to have low cross coupling characteristics, each

20 encapsulated in a different compartment of the encasement, and

conduction means coupled through the encasement to the elements for carrying electrical signals to the elements to stress the elements, and for carrying electrical signals produced by the elements 25 when the elements are stressed.

1 2. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein said encasement is formed of a generally
planar base section an upper side of which is
formed with said compartments, and a top section
5 for placement on the upper side of the base
section to enclose the compartments.

10 3. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein said encasement is made of polyurethane.

15 4. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein said encasement is made of polyethelene.

20 5. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein said encasement is made of rubber.

25 6. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein the compartments of the encasement holding
the piezoelectric elements are formed in a closely
packed and nested arrangement in the encasement.

25 7. A transducer assembly as in Claim 6
wherein the compartments and piezoelectric elements
are generally polygonal in shape and dimensioned
so that the elements fit snugly in the compartments.

1 8. A transducer assembly as in Claim 7
wherein the compartments and piezoelectric elements
are generally rectangular in shape.

5 9. A transducer assembly as in Claim 7
wherein the compartments and piezoelectric elements
are generally triangular in shape.

10 10. A transudcer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein the piezoelectric elements are generally
flattened, and are selected to have low cross-
coupling characteristics.

15 11. A transducer assembly as in Claim 10
wherein the piezoelectric elements are made of
lead titanate.

20 12. A transducer assembly as in Claim 10
wherein the piezolectric elements are made of lead
metaniobate.

25 13. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein the piezoelectric elements are formed
generally in squares having a thickness of from
about one-hundredth to one inch, and a width of
from about one-eighth to about four inches.

1 14. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein the piezoelectric elements are held in
place in the compartments by an adhesive.

5 15. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
wherein the conduction means comprises
conductive sheets disposed on opposing sides
of piezoelectric elements, and
conductive strips of material placed in
10 contact with the conductive sheets and extending
through the encasement to carry electrical signals
from an external source to the sheets, and from
the sheets to external electronics.

15 16. A transducer assembly as in Claim 15
wherein said conductive strips are composed of a
composition of conductive particles and elastomer.

17. A transducer assembly as in Claim 1
20 wherein the conduction means comprises
a first sheet of conductive material disposed
in contact with one side of each of the piezoelectric
elements,
a second sheet of conductive material disposed
25 in contact with the other side of each of the
elements, and

1 conductors for carrying electrical signals
from an external source to the first and second
sheets of material, and from the first and second
sheets to external electronics.

5

18. A sonar transducer assembly comprising
a casing made of a flexible, resilient material
formed to have a thickness which is less than the
length and width thereof, and including a multiplicity
10 of compartments located in a side-by-side, nested
relationship generally in a planar array,
a multiplicity of piezoelectric elements,
each disposed in a different compartment and each
having top and bottom surfaces which are generally
15 parallel with each other and with the plane of the
casing, each element being poled in the thickness
direction and having low cross-coupling characteristics,
conductive sheets disposed on the top and
bottom surfaces of the elements, and
20 conductors extending through the casing to
contact the conductive sheets for carrying electrical
signals to the sheets to stress the elements and
cause them to emit sonar signals, and for carrying
electrical signals produced by the elements when
25 the elements intercept reflected sonar signals.

1 19. A flexible piezoelectric transducer
assembly comprising

an array of spaced-apart piezoelectric elements
arranged generally in a line and selected to have
5 low cross-coupling characteristics,

conductor means coupled to the piezoelectric
elements for carrying electrical signals thereto
to stress the elements, and for carrying electrical
signals produced by the elements when the elements
10 are stressed,

means for supporting the piezoelectric elements
in the array, and

means for preventing external access of fluid
to the elements.

15

20. A transducer assembly as in Claim 19
wherein said supporting means comprises a sleeve
means in which are disposed the piezoelectric
elements.

20

21. A transducer assembly as in Claim 20
wherein the preventing means comprises a nonconductive
encapsulant disposed about the piezoelectric
elements to prevent access of fluid to the elements.

25

22. A transducer assembly as in Claim 19
wherein said piezoelectric elements comprise

1 elongate bars having top and bottom surfaces, and
wherein the conductor means comprise a pair of
conductors, one of which is coupled to the top
surfaces of each of the bars and the other of
5 which is coupled to the bottom surfaces.

23. A transducer assembly as in Claim 19
wherein said piezoelectric elements comprise
elongate cylinders polarized in the radial direction,
10 and wherein the conductor means comprise a pair of
conductors, each of which is coupled to a respective
opposing side surface of each of the cylinders.

24. A transducer assembly as in Claim 19
15 wherein said piezoelectric elements comprise
elongate, hollow cylinders polarized in the radial
direction, and having inside and outside surfaces,
and wherein the conductor means comprise a pair of
conductors, one of which is coupled to the outside
20 surfaces of each of the cylinders and the other of
which is coupled to the inside surfaces.

25. A transducer assembly as in Claim 21
wherein said encapsulant is a fluid.

25

26. A transducer assembly as in Claim 21
wherein said encapsulant is a flexible, resilient
material.

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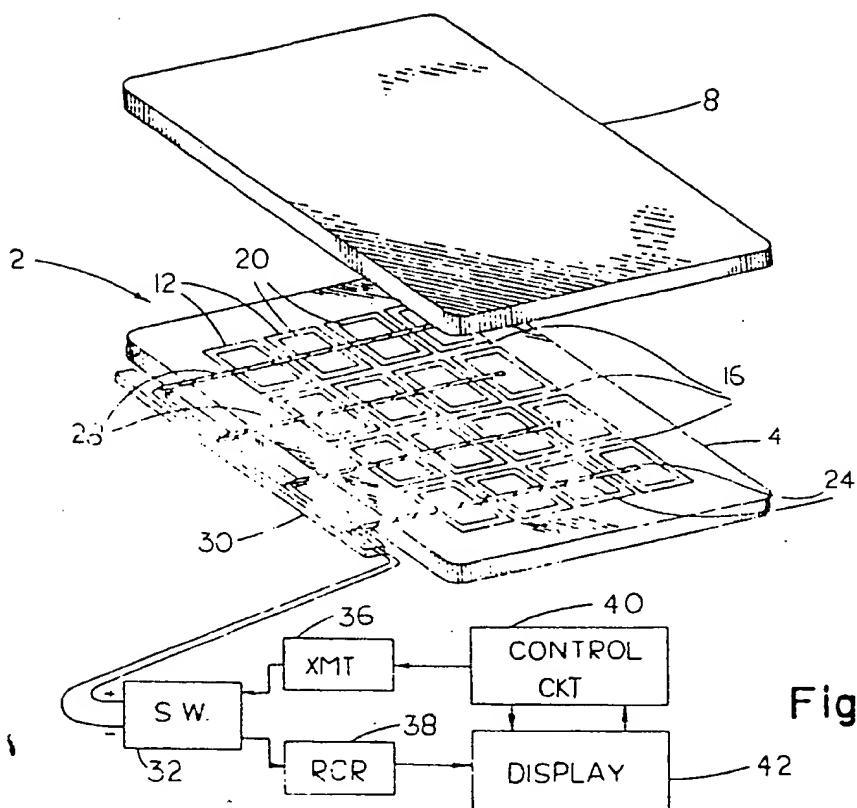


Fig. 1

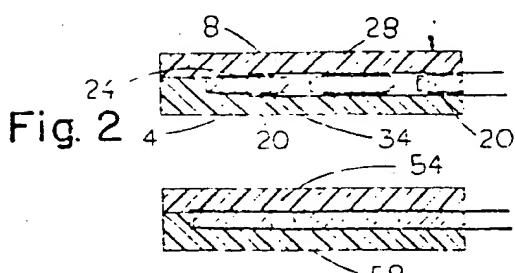


Fig. 2

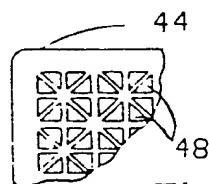


Fig. 3

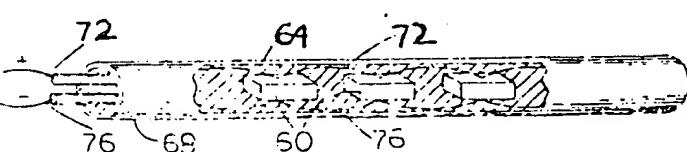


Fig. 4

Fig. 5

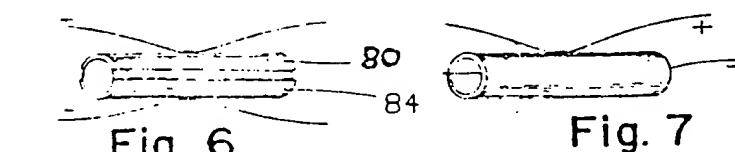


Fig. 6

Fig. 7

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